

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISCLOSURE

A network element comprises a control element (CE), a plurality of forwarding element (FEs) and an interconnect in communication with said CE and at least one of said FEs. Communication across the interconnect between the CE and the plurality of FEs is  
5 done in accordance with a protocol that includes a binding phase used to provide a data channel between the CE and a first one of the FEs. The binding phase is further used to provide a control channel between the CE and the first one of the FEs, the control channel used to transport control and configuration messages. The control channel is separate from the data channel. The protocol also includes a capability discovery phase, a  
10 configuration operation phase and an unbind phase executed between the CE and the FE.